

St. Andrew Presbyterian
Albuquerque, NM

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DO WE HAVE A FUTURE?

Matthew 10: 24-39

The 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) convened yesterday in San Jose, California. For those of you not familiar with this gathering, think of it as our denomination's bi-annual Super Bowl. Yesterday the Assembly elected as Moderator Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, a 39 year-old new church development pastor in San Francisco. He becomes our church's highest-ranking official, for the next two years the public face of our denomination. Under his leadership our commissioners to the Assembly will make some very important decisions for our church. Please pray for all our sisters and brothers gathered in San Jose that the Spirit may indeed speak to the church and guide our actions and decisions.

The first Sunday of a General Assembly is a good time for us to ask some crucial questions. I suppose the singular question that we must attend to is this: "Do we have a future?" Now that is a highly speculative question to ask and an even more difficult question to answer. In truth, all the main line denominations in the United States find themselves asking this question. If you are Lutheran or Episcopal or United Methodist or Disciples of Christ or Presbyterian, this is a very real issue.

All the mainline denominations, so dominant and strong in the 1950's, have lost membership and influence. The numbers are inescapable. The conflicts in the Episcopal community have been especially painful and divisive. Perhaps all the mainline denominations see the Episcopalian situation and shudder, knowing it could well happen to any of us. And in many cases, it already has.

So we share this question, "Do we have a future?" with many of our sisters and brothers in the other mainline denominations. Now I am not one to sing the tired, old "ain't it awful" song. I have never thought crying into our beer or our wine or our martini does much good. So today let's look at that question without wringing our hands. Does our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have a future? And does our congregation, St. Andrew, have a future? The two questions are closely related, because we are a connectional church. What happens to us impacts the rest of the denomination and what happens to the denomination impacts us. We are in this together and so our futures are bound up with one another.

Perhaps we also need to ask this question, "Why should we care?" Haven't churches come and gone over the years? Think of all the churches

that have lost vitality and simply faded away. If one were a proponent of natural selection, it would simply be a matter of the survival of the fittest. And if one were really harsh, one could say that God simply turns away from some of these churches and so they should die.

But I live by hope and I do think that the health and vitality of every church matters not only to the people involved, but also to the world. And I would even say it matters to God. I think it pains God just as it pains many of us to see our struggles and our difficulties. So I think we should care. I care. I know many of you care. I dare to say that God cares.

This past week I read an excellent booklet published by our outgoing Stated Clerk Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick. It is entitled, "Is there a Future for the Presbyterian Church?" This paper helped me formulate my thoughts and I will borrow freely from it. Clifton just finished serving for twelve years as our denomination's Stated Clerk and before that fifteen years as the Director of our World Missions. He has unique insights to share.

Rev. Kirkpatrick suggests that we have three areas that should cause us deep concern. First, the obvious loss of membership and loss of vitality. Since 1966 the Presbyterian Church has declined from a high of about 4,250,000 members to about 2,267,000 members by the end of 2006. We are half as large as we were 40 years ago. Of course, the main reason for our membership decline has been the number of deaths in our ranks and the fact we have not drawn in more new members.

As a result, the size of our congregations has shrunk. The median size of one of our Presbyterian congregations is 105. And over 4000 of our congregations do not have installed pastors. Over a fourth of the 43 congregations in our Presbytery fit that category-congregations without regular pastoral leadership. And perhaps the biggest concern has been the resulting loss of vitality in many of these struggling congregations. Instead of a mission mentality, there is a survival mentality. Not good.

A second cause of concern is a divisive partisan spirit with its interest group politics. Sometimes our General Assembly has as much political posturing and maneuvering as you would find in the halls of Congress. And sometimes the competition among groups is just as intense. Not good.

A third cause of concern is a loss of a dynamic, unifying witness. That is to say our diversity causes us to gravitate toward our small piece of the pie. In a time of shrinking budgets Presbyterians fight for every available penny for their particular projects. And thus an overarching sense of unity and mission has been lost. Also, not good.

Given those challenges, Kirkpatrick also highlights six areas of strength in our denomination. First, we have a strong theological foundation

in our Church's confessions. We do take theology seriously, especially the call to love God with our minds. Second, we are making a difference for Christ in our nation. Our congregations and their witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ, their witness for peace and justice, make a huge difference in the lives of individuals and communities across our land. Third, we are making a difference for Christ across the world. Our mission workers across the globe do amazing things. I saw that first hand in Peru a year or so ago. There is much to be proud of when we consider what Presbyterians are doing in some very difficult places across the world.

Kirkpatrick also celebrates a fourth strength, our seminaries, which he calls the crown jewels of our denomination. Our seminaries are second to none in what they have to offer the church universal. I have served on our church's Theological Education Fund and I have visited many of our seminaries. They truly are remarkable, the most remarkable of all of course being Austin Seminary! A fifth strength is our commitment to being ecumenical. We strongly believe in seeking the unity that Christ gives to all believers. We do mission in concert with brothers and sisters in other denominations because this is what Christ calls us to do. A final strength is, in truth, a large number of vital and vibrant congregations. As Rev. Kirkpatrick says, "The vast majority of our congregations are alive and well and seek to live faithfully the Christian life." That is by far the most encouraging aspect of our life together-the vibrancy of so many of our congregations.

Let me consider St. Andrew's future from the point of view of these three areas of concern and these six areas of strength. Regarding numbers, our congregation has grown and shrunk, grown and shrunk, and grown again over its 49 years of service. Right now, in the year of our Lord 2008, we have reached something of a plateau. We have about 240 members and that has been the case for the last year or so. Probably our biggest challenge is learning how to invite folks to our worship. We obviously cannot say, "We will build it and they will come." They-that is, prospective members-will come if we invite them.

St. Andrew is a very welcoming congregation once people arrive on our doorsteps. We need to learn how to be an inviting congregation-offering invitations to neighbors, family, friends, and co-workers to share in our life in Christ. I lifted this up in our latest church newsletter and I lift it up again today. We can grow if we really want to. That means praying for those who need us and actually inviting folks. Whether they come and whether they stay is between them and God. But we need to plant the seeds. This

continues, in my mind, to be our biggest challenge. And it is true for our entire denomination as well.

I don't sense that we are a divided congregation. We are indeed a diverse congregation, but I do not sense a partisan spirit. I do sense that we are looking for an over-arching unifying sense of mission. The group responding to Gil Rendel's symposium on change is looking at our mission and focus. Another group is looking at the best ways to utilize our Sunday morning experience. And our Session will examine these issues closely in our August retreat. I think every congregation that goes through a building project faces this question, "So now that we have finished the building, where do we put our energies?" I hope that we can come to a broad consensus about the next steps for our congregation's primary mission focus. I ask for your prayers and your input.

Many of the six strengths of the Presbyterian Church can be found at St. Andrew. We do care about theology and the life of the mind here. We are making a difference for Christ in this community. I think of how crucial we are in the work of Share Your Care and Martineztown and Habitat and the Storehouse. We care about and support world missions not only with money, but with our people going abroad to serve others. We care about and support our seminaries. We engage in ecumenical ventures not only with the New Mexico Conference of Churches but also with Albuquerque Interfaith. And I believe we are a vital congregation in so many respects. All these strengths bode well for our future-by the grace of God.

As I listen to Matthew's Gospel, the words of Jesus give us our best hope for the future. Jesus said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows." We are of value to God. We matter to God. The good people of the Presbyterian Church worldwide matter to God. And you the good people of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church matter to God. God knows when the sparrow falls and God knows when we struggle. And I trust that God will give us a "future and a hope", as the prophet Jeremiah said.

On our new moderator Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow has a blog. On it a member of his church wrote this: "At the General Assembly I found myself overwhelmed by hope. Bruce is young, dynamic, and passionate about the questions, not the answers. I am so proud to be a part of a community that is embracing the future. I am part of a community that is anything but dead." And here is how Bruce responded, "Let's start focusing like a laser on making disciples of all nations and being servant

leaders in the name of Christ. Then we will care less about membership statistics and more about increasing our commitments, changing the way we live, creating changes in our culture. Then we will dream dreams worthy of God.” All I can say is Amen and Amen.